

A Medieval Christmas in Appleby

Life for most people in medieval England was hard and never more so than in the rural North, where land was difficult to manage, climate was harsh and proximity to Scotland brought its own special problems. But Christmas in medieval Appleby, as elsewhere, would surely have provided a brief opportunity for rich and poor alike to forget their problems. Or would it?

Appleby Archaeology's January AGM was enlivened by a presentation by the Red Wyvern historical re-enactment society on the theme of "Christmas in medieval Appleby". Our journey into the past was directed by James Hodgson, leader of the Wyverns, dressed for the evening as a "man at arms". He invited us first of all to inspect his desperately inadequate gear. It was a cold evening but he was wearing a sort of loose, open-necked shirt, woolen trousers, and a curious cod-piece. The wool trousers, he said, were unbelievably itchy though, underneath, he said, he was wearing linen braes that made life vaguely bearable. We did not envy him.

First, James introduced us to his colleague the Reeve, the Lord's representative in matters that required consultation with the "common people". He was wearing something a little more civilised (not to mention warmer), as befit his rank. His role, he said, was critical at Christmas- not least because it was the Lord who would be expected to dispense the Christmas feast (in return for payment of the Michaelmas Day rent of course, not to mention the 'boon hen' - an Appleby tradition that entitled him additionally to claim a hen from each tenant).

Then we met the Cook, who apologised for her appearance as a "loose woman" in consequence of the arthritic fingers that prevented her from fully tightening the laces on her bodice. She assured us that she was usually perfectly "straight-laced". The Cook waxed fondly upon her memories of roast goose, woodcock and the wonderful pie made of all the various bits that went into a venison pie - ears, intestines etc. She loved a bit of "umble pie" she assured us. She remembered too the fun that might be found at Christmas - snowball fights and skating on the frozen river, the hunting and the special privilege that permitted a carefully selected peasant "together with one other" to attend the Lord's feast in the castle on New Years Day "for the space of two candles". Happy days indeed.

And finally, we met an altogether sterner gentleman, the Swordsman, who reminded us that Appleby sometimes had visitors from Scotland who did not believe in peace and goodwill - Scottish reivers who had besieged the castle four times, no less, between 1314 and 1322? The castle successfully held out on each occasion of course, but the town was burnt to the ground.

And then there were 'reminiscences' about the battles and escapades Appleby had enjoyed in support of its liege-lord, Lord Clifford. To the dismay of Appleby Archaeology members still digesting their tea, a "field surgery" box was opened to reveal a grisly collection of trepanning equipment and devices for amputating fingers, hands, and whole legs. The Black Death was also mentioned and that other perennial nuisance floods that have always plagued life in the village.

By this time it was clear the spirit of Christmas had passed on and it was time to go home although everyone agreed that it had been an educational, if sobering experience. The Red Wyverns can be contacted at redwyvernssociety@gmail.com if you want protection from those Scots.

Martin Joyce